

## Message Text

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ACTION EPA-02

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FM AMEMBASSY SEOUL

TO SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 468

C O N F I D E N T I A L SEOUL 3999

E.O. 11652: GDS

TAGS: SWEL SENV KS

SUBJECT: HUMAN TOXICITY US MADE RODENTICIDE

SUMMARY: NEWLY DEVELOPED RODENTICIDE, MANUFACTURED BY ROHM & HAAS, MAY HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE FOR DEATHS OF SEVERAL KOREAN NATIONALS. COMPANY REPS HAVE ASKED WHETHER, IF NECESSARY, EMBASSY MIGHT INTERCEDE WITH ROKG TO OBTAIN TISSUE OF DECEASED TO ENABLE COMPANY TO DETERMINE WHETHER RODENTICIDE ACTUALLY RESPONSIBLE, REQUEST INSTRUCTIONS AS TO WHETHER EMBASSY MAY APPROACH ROKG AGENCIES INVOLVED ON BEHALF OF COMPANY OR WHETHER ENVIROMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY (EPA) DESIRES OR REQUIRES ACTION ON BEHALF OF USG.

1. REPRESENTATIVES OF ROHM & HAAS OF PHILADELPHIA, PARTICIPANTS IN LARGEST US/ROK JOINT VENTURE IN PRODUCTION AGRICULTURAL CHEMICALS, HAVE INFORMED EMBASSY OF FOLLOWING. COMPANY HAD DEVELOPED NEW RODENTICIDE TO BE SOLD UNDER TRADE-NAME VACOR. EPA MANDATED TESTS INVOLVING ANIMALS UP TO SIZE OF BABOONS INDICATED VACOR IS HIGHLY TOXIC TO RODENTS, BUT NON-TOXIC TO HUMANS EXCEPT IN VERY LARGE DOSES. BASED ON THESE TESTS, EPA HAS APPROVED VACOR FOR SALE IN US. PRODUCT HAS BEEN DISTRIBUTED TO DEALERS IN US BUT SALES HAVE BEEN WITHHELD PENDING RESULTS OF INVESTIGATION, WHICH COMPANY REPS NOW CONDUCTING, INTO DEATHS IN KOREA FOR WHICH PRODUCT MAY HAVE BEEN RESPONSIBLE.

2. BECAUSE OF INTEREST IN PRODUCT GENERATED BY LEADING  
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AMERICAN AUTHORITY ON RODENT CONTROL, ROK WAS FIRST

NATION TO PROCURE VACOR FOR PUBLIC DISTRIBUTION. ONE HUNDRED TONS OF VACOR CONCENTRATE WERE IMPORTED EARLY THIS YEAR, TESTED BY KOREAN AUTHORITIES, AND FOUND NON-TOXIC TO HUMANS ON BASIS OF ANIMAL REACTIONS. KOREAN FABRICATOR DEVELOPED MIXTURE (INCLUDING TWO PERCENT VACOR WITH CRACKED RICE) SATISFACTORY FOR PUBLIC USE. PRODUCT WAS THEN PURCHASED AND DISTRIBUTED TO OVER TWO MILLION HOUSEHOLDS THROUGHOUT KOREA BY KOREAN GOVERNMENT AGENCIES FOR USE IN ONE-DAY RAT ERADICATION EFFORT ON APRIL 30. PAPER ENVELOPES IN WHICH MATERIAL WAS DISTRIBUTED INDICATED IT NOT TOXIC TO HUMAN-BEINGS.

3. SUBSEQUENT TO APRIL 30, COMPANY REPS STATE THAT TWO PERSONS KNOWN TO HAVE EATEN MIXTURE HAVE DIED AND SIX OTHER DEATHS HAVE OCCURED OR ARE ANTICIPATED. COMPANY REPS FEEL THAT THERE MAY BE MORE CASES, KNOWLEDGE OF WHICH KOREAN GOVERNMENT MAY BE SUPPRESSING. COMPANY REPS APPEAR SATISFIED THAT MIXTURE WAS PROPERLY PREPARED.

4. IN CASE OF TWO KNOWN DEATHS, INVOLVING EMPLOYEES OF RESTAURANT IN MASAN, AUTOPSY HAS BEEN PERFORMED AND TISSUES ARE NOW BEING HELD AT NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF SCIENTIFIC INVESTIGATION. COMPANY REPS HAVE ASKED INSTITUTE TO RELEASE TISSUE SAMPLES TO THEM SO THAT COMPANY ANALYSTS MAY DETERMINE WHETHER PRODUCT WAS ACTUALLY RESPONSIBLE FOR THE DEATHS. INSTITUTE OFFICIALS, HOWEVER, HAVE STATED THAT KOREAN LAW PRECLUDES RELEASE OF ANY MATERIAL OR INVESTIGATION FINDINGS IN CASE WHICH MAY INVOLVE CRIMINAL LIABILITY.

5. COMPANY REPS STATE THAT COMPANY FEELS OBVIOUS OBLIGATION TO STOCKHOLDERS AND THOSE WHO HAVE HELPED FINANCE DEVELOPMENT, PRODUCTION AND PREPARATIONS FOR SALE OF VACOR TO WHICH THIRTY MILLION DOLLARS HAS BEEN DEVOTED. MORE IMPORTANTLY, COMPANY FEELS RESPONSIBILITY TO GENERAL PUBLIC, BOTH IN KOREA AND US, TO DETERMINE WHETHER VACOR WAS, IN FACT, RESPONSIBLE FOR DEATHS IN KOREA AND IS TOXIC TO HUMAN-BEINGS. THEY STATE THAT COMPANY TECHNICIANS

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AND EPA ANALYSTS, ON BASIS OF PREVIOUS TESTS, ARE HIGHLY RELUCTANT TO BELIEVE VACOR IS TOXIC, BUT ADMIT THAT THIS NOT SCIENTIFIC IMPOSSIBILITY. IN ANY EVENT COMPANY FEELS UNDER STRONG OBLIGATION TO DETERMINE WHETHER VACOR WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR DEATHS HERE FOR ITS OWN PROTECTION AND TO PREVENT SALE OF POTENTIALLY HARMFUL MATERIAL THROUGHOUT US.

6. COMPANY REPS STATED THEY THEREFORE APPROACHED EMBASSY TO DETERMINE WHETHER IT MIGHT BE WILLING TO REQUEST THAT ROKG AGENCIES RELEASE PORTION OF TISSUES TAKEN FROM MASAN DECEASED TO PERMIT COMPANY TO MAKE INDEPENDENT ANALYSIS OF CAUSE OF DEATH. GIVEN POTENTIAL MAGNITUDE AND NATURE OF THIS PROBLEM, HOWEVER, EMBASSY HAS INFORMED COMPANY REPS THAT IT WOULD NOT BE WILLING TO APPROACH ROKG OFFICIALLY UNLESS INSTRUCTED TO DO SO. ACTION REQUESTED: REQUEST INSTRUCTIONS AS TO WHETHER EMBASSY SHOULD ACT ON BEHALF OF COMPANY IN OBTAINING TISSUE SAMPLES IF COMAPNY REPS REQUEST IT TO DO SO AND/OR WHETHER EMBASSY SHOULD TAKE ANY ACTION ON BEHALF OF EPA OR OTHER USG REGULATORY AGENCY. EMBASSY FEELS THIS IS MAJOR PROBLEM INVOLVING POTENTIALLY GREAT EMBARRASSEMENT TO US FIRM AND TO USG AGENCIES AS WELL. SNEIDER

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